

COMMUNITY CARE LICENSING DIVISION

*"Promoting Healthy, Safe and
Supportive Community Care"*

TECHNICAL SUPPORT PROGRAM

Self-Assessment Guide

GROUP HOME PROVIDERS ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE COMMUNITY



CDSS

CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE COMMUNITY

A GUIDEBOOK FOR GROUP HOME PROVIDERS

What makes a good neighbor? From our own experiences in our own homes, we all have a pretty clear idea of neighborliness. Good neighbors are people we can trust to keep an eye on the house when we're away, people we can rely on to give us a hand if we need a little extra help, people we can depend on to help keep the street looking good by keeping their lawns mowed, their yards neat, and houses painted. Good neighbors watch out for their own children, and for ours, to make sure they are playing safely and staying out of trouble. Good neighbors are the folks that we're glad bought the house next door and that we miss when they move away.

When a group home moves into a residential community, you become the new neighbor on the block and the neighborhood's expectations about you are the same as they would be about any new neighbor. Because there have been instances where group homes have not made good neighbors, community residents are often suspicious or hostile when they learn that a group home has opened, or is about to open, in their neighborhood.

What can you, as a licensee of a group home, do to turn this attitude around and prove that group homes can be good neighbors? Maybe this pamphlet can be of help. It contains ideas, suggestions and tips -- identified by experienced providers and community care licensing evaluators -- for establishing and maintaining positive relationships in the community. It also includes a summary of the laws and regulations for how group homes must relate to residents and agencies in the community, as well as some examples of protocols and communications that you may wish to adapt for use in your own program.

We hope that you will take these suggestions to heart and think seriously about incorporating them into your group home program. Those of use who are committed to providing neighborhood-based treatment services for vulnerable children must make sure that our residents are supervised, our homes are maintained and our staff act in a responsible, positive way that contributes to the quality of our communities. In short, we must be good neighbors!

BEFORE YOU MOVE IN

Even before you begin caring for children at a new location, there is work to do to reassure your new neighbors. The old maxim "you never get a second chance to make a good first impression" applies here. Do your homework so that you can anticipate and prevent problems wherever possible. Consider the following:

- ◆ Know your neighborhood and make sure you have a legal right to be there.

BEFORE YOU MOVE IN (Continued)

- ◆ Develop a neighbor introduction and prepare written materials about your program that can be shared with neighbors; be clear, factual and straightforward (See the “Samples and Examples” section, page 10 for an example of a “Neighbor Introduction”).
- ◆ Have a good neighbor plan ready in advance and put it into effect as soon as you move in.

MAINTENANCE

Maintenance is the essence of “good neighborliness.” Ill will often develops in neighborhoods because property is not kept up. The appearance of the property is often considered a direct reflection of every other aspect of your program. Good maintenance of the house may also act to reassure neighbors that your program and the children cared for are equally well cared-for, supervised and under control.

- ◆ Each home should be physically maintained in a manner, which does credit to the neighborhood. The objective should be to have the best looking place in the neighborhood.
- ◆ Conduct monthly inspections of the agency’s group homes and recognize or reward the staff of the home that is most presentable and attractive.
- ◆ Adhere to community standards for landscaping, painting and decor.

CLIENT CONDUCT

The conduct of the children served in your home will be expected to meet high standards. Your rules should be consistent with what other prudent parents in the neighborhood establish for their children. Group homes serving six or fewer children are exempt from local zoning ordinances because they are considered a residential use of property. They are considered a home just like all other homes in the neighborhood. Following are some suggested rules to ensure your children are also good neighbors:

- ◆ Don’t let residents loiter in the front yard; use the back yard or park for outdoor activities to limit group home “visibility” in the neighborhood.
- ◆ Don’t allow residents to play radios outside the house; keep the volume of stereos and television at a level that does not disturb the neighbors.
- ◆ Residents should not walk in large groups, but should be separated out as they walk in the neighborhood. They should not cut corners and walk on other people’s lawns or walk in the middle of the street.
- ◆ Kids should be prohibited from dressing or acting in ways that are frightening or threatening to neighbors (gang apparel, body piercing, hand signs, smoking, etc.).

CLIENT CONDUCT (Continued)

- ◆ They should dress appropriately and use appropriate language. Don't let adolescent residents intimidate or tease younger children in the neighborhood.
- ◆ Make it a practice for residents to wave and say hi to neighbors.

STAFF CONDUCT

Simply put, your staff have to do their jobs if your care home is going to fit into the neighborhood. Your staff are an extension of yourself and, of course, of your program. Neighbors or responding agencies cannot be expected to see any difference between you and your staff. Consider some of the following rules for staff conduct:

- ◆ Observe all vehicle safety and driving laws at all times.
- ◆ When transporting residents, show respect for the neighbors. For example, when picking up a child, don't honk the horn and leave the engine running; park the car properly and go inside to get the resident.
- ◆ Be aware of parking around the care home; don't park in a manner that causes concern to the neighbors.
- ◆ Be sure that the residents are properly supervised in the community.
- ◆ Do not discipline children in public unless absolutely necessary.
- ◆ The attitude of staff in the group home sets the tone for the behavior of the residents. If staff enter a community with a chip on their shoulder or respond in a defensive or aggressive manner when neighbors have complaints or questions about the group home, a congenial relationship will never develop. Even though they have a legal right to be there, staff and residents should adopt the position that they are guests in the community.
- ◆ Be an overall good neighbor. Walk the block like the kids do. See the neighbors and let them see you. Build relationships on a personal level as much as your time allows.

COMPLAINTS

Take all complaints seriously and make it a priority to respond to complainants as soon as possible. Failure to be responsive to complaints usually will result in the need to find a listener somewhere. If it's not you, it will be local government, local media or the local licensing office. The involvement of any of these entities can start a series of processes over which you have little direct control. Wouldn't you be in a better position if you had the first opportunity to respond to concerns? Consider the following:

COMPLAINTS (Continued)

- ◆ Make sure the neighbors know who to contact in the group home if they have a complaint or a question, and how to get hold of that person.
- ◆ Provide mediation training to the person assigned to deal with complaints.
- ◆ Always designate one person to be your community liaison. While staff on-site can do “Band-Aid interventions,” getting a complaint to your administrative designee allows for proper follow-up, consistency of response and control.
- ◆ Develop a written protocol or procedures for staff to follow when a complaint is received.
- ◆ Learn to field complaints in a positive way. If a neighbor complains, legitimately or not, over comply. If it is not your residents’ problem, you might briefly say so, but quickly offer to remedy the situation if it is in your power to do so. If it might be your residents, fix it if at all possible. If it was your residents, fix it with a commitment that it won’t happen again, then review your systems and/or staff to see if changes or improvements are needed.
- ◆ Keep your Board of Directors informed about neighborhood issues and, if possible, select a Board member from each community that hosts a group home. Board members provide a valuable link to the community and help to facilitate communication and understanding of the issues from the perspective of both the community and the group home.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Do not ignore your relationship with local law enforcement, or with any local response agencies. Although they exist to serve you as well as your neighbors, know that you may be perceived as increasing their workload. Therefore, make every effort to make their jobs as easy for them as you can. Be proactive in gaining their understanding and support. A “bunker” mentality on your part will mean that law enforcement will only hear a one-sided account of any situation. Make their jobs as easy for them as you can. Consider the following:

- ◆ Get to know the local police and fire department before they may be called to your house. Invite them to become familiar with the program and work site.
- ◆ Invite the police officer on the beat to the group home for visits, dinner and talks with the residents. If you ever have to call them for assistance, it is important that they have some understanding of your program, the residents, and some positive experiences with the program.
- ◆ Consider recruiting a police officer for your Board of Directors. One agency did this after realizing the police had a very negative image of the program because of events that had happened in the distant past. Several years later the agency was selected as Charity of the Year by the Police Officers Association.

LAW ENFORCEMENT (Continued)

- ◆ Ask the police department to send out training personnel to share with your staff how they do business and vice versa. An educational program at the group home can be a very positive contact for police and fire personnel.
- ◆ Develop a back-up system of support within the program to minimize your reliance on law enforcement in crisis situations.
- ◆ When dealing with the local police, take care of matters at the police station, if possible, rather than have the police come out to the house; having a patrol car in front of the house on a regular basis reinforces negative images with neighbors.

COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Group homes successfully serving children with the same needs often fare very differently in their relationships with neighbors and the community in general. Sometimes this is because of local circumstances beyond the control of the licensee. More often, however, this is because of differences in approach to local communication. Public relations are important! Consider some of the following approaches:

- ◆ Hold periodic open houses; invite the neighbors in now and then. Don't violate confidentiality but show off your program and what residents have and can achieve; show your neighbors your successes to help them accept and possibly support the need for your program.
- ◆ When someone moves into the neighborhood, have a staff member, maybe accompanied by a resident, take over cookies, explain who they are, acquaint them with the program and give them the name and phone number of the administrator or agency liaison, should concerns arise.
- ◆ Many cities require notification of all property owners within 300 feet before significant property improvements can be undertaken. This means your agency and the zoning department will hear from any and all disgruntled neighbors whether or not their concerns are connected with your project, and you can target your efforts to build relationships.
- ◆ Invite community leaders to visit the work site; invite key individuals to agency events with complimentary tickets.
- ◆ Identify your most critical neighbor and enlist his or her assistance in developing standards for group homes. If you can satisfy this person, you won't have to worry about anybody else.

COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY RELATIONS (Continued)

- ◆ Assign a staff person as liaison to the public school(s); get to know the teachers, counselors and administrators to help open channels of communication and send the message that you are committed to the students' academic, social and emotional development.
- ◆ Support the participation of your residents in school sports, drama, student government, service clubs, etc. The good will that results from success stories contributes to the positive image of the agency as a whole.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Community service activities are wonderful opportunities to demonstrate your commitment to the neighborhood and your concern for the good citizenship of your children. Following is a list of community service activities you could undertake:

- ◆ Remove and replace garbage cans for the elderly on trash day.
- ◆ Cut lawns, make home repairs or do yard work for neighbors who are incapacitated or elderly.
- ◆ Participate in neighborhood improvement projects.
- ◆ If graffiti appears in the neighborhood, remove it even if your residents are not responsible.
- ◆ Help clean up the neighborhood in the aftermath of storms, floods, etc.
- ◆ Participate in local community special events.
- ◆ Purchase goods and services from local merchants.
- ◆ Loan group home equipment to neighbors.
- ◆ Participate in the adopt-a-highway program.

JOIN, JOIN, JOIN!

Belonging to local groups and community service organizations is a great way to “walk the walk” as a member of the community. Following are some suggestions for getting involved in the community:

- ◆ Participate in the neighborhood watch program.
- ◆ Participate in homeowners and apartment associations.

JOIN, JOIN, JOIN! (Continued)

- ◆ Encourage staff to get involved in community organizations (e.g. as board members of other community nonprofits, volunteers with police or fire auxiliaries, etc.) so that you will be known and seen as people who are actively involved in the betterment of the community.
- ◆ Belong everywhere: Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, etc. You are a member of the community and should act like one.

REGULATIONS AND POLICIES

Being a good neighbor is not specifically required by a licensing regulation or other laws, but there are some areas of licensing requirements that have been developed in response to public concern in this area. Review these areas provided below to ensure you are in compliance.

Requirements for Responding to Neighborhood Incidents and Complaints

Licensees of group homes licensed for six or fewer children are required by Health and Safety Code Section 1524.5 to have written procedures approved by licensing to respond to incidents and complaints. The procedures must include:

- ◆ A fixed weekly time the licensee or their representative will be at the facility to respond to neighborhood complaints.
- ◆ Procedures for notifying the licensee or their representative of neighborhood incidents or complaints.
- ◆ Procedures for the licensee or their representative to personally investigate neighborhood incidents or complaints.
- ◆ Procedures for notifying the person in writing who makes a complaint or reports an incident of the action taken by the facility to fix the problem or a reason why no action was taken.

Written Notice of Placement Requirements

County probation or parole officers making placements of wards of the juvenile court (Welfare & Institutions Code 602) into a group home are required by Health and Safety Code Section 1567.3 to provide written notification of the placement to the County Probation Office in which the group home is located.

Group home licensees receiving out-of-county wards of the court must ensure the following steps are followed:

- ◆ Ask the placing probation/parole officer if the notice of out-of-county placement has been sent.

Written Notice of Placement Requirements (Continued)

- ◆ If the probation/parole officer's response is "yes," document his/her name and telephone number, and the name and telephone number of the local probation officer, in the child's file.
- ◆ If the probation/parole officer's response is "no," document the response and his/her name and telephone number in the child's file.

Confidentiality of Children's Records

Children's records are considered confidential and access to information contained in the records is restricted to facility staff, licensing and the child's authorized representative. Law enforcement per Welfare and Institutions Code Section 827 is allowed access to children's records only when they are actively participating in criminal or juvenile proceedings involving the minor, or the judge of the juvenile court has by court order allowed the records of the minor to be reviewed by a court designee.

When a Child is Absent Without Leave (AWOL): Reporting to Law Enforcement

When a child runs away from a facility, leaves without permission, or fails to return to the facility at the appointed time, providers are often uncertain about how long to wait before making a report to the local police department or sheriff's office that the child has gone AWOL. Community Care Licensing (CCL) regulations require that AWOLs which "threaten the physical or emotional health and safety of a child" be reported to CCL. However, there are not regulations that specify when an AWOL should be reported to law enforcement.

It should be quite clear when an AWOL meets the CCL reporting criteria. But some AWOL situations allow a reasonable conclusion on the part of the group home staff that the child is not a danger to himself or others and can reasonably be expected to return to the facility within a short period of time. Calling in the AWOL to the police or sheriff in such circumstances can result in allegations of unnecessary over-reporting and over-taxing of local resources. This can lead to friction between providers and law enforcement and can have a serious negative impact on community relations.

It is not possible or prudent to give specific advice on when a provider should notify law enforcement of an AWOL. It is strongly suggested, however, that you meet with your local law enforcement agency and come to an agreement about when, and under what circumstances, you will call in an AWOL.

This agreement, preferably in writing, should be shared with your licensing regional or local Office. Incident reports submitted to CCL regarding AWOLs should refer to the terms of this agreement and the actions taken by the facility with respect to the AWOL should be consistent with the procedures agreed upon between law enforcement and the provider. In this way, everyone -- the provider, CCL, and the local police or sheriff -- will be on the same page with regard to reporting AWOLs to law enforcement.